

understanding that a leader is nothing if she has not gained trustworthy supporters. The game also fosters the development of reflective skills, an attitude of self-observation that is essential in all “soft skills,” from communication to leadership, from negotiation to presentation—and which is a distinctive feature of all expert players, who always wonder, in the back of their minds, “How can I perform better the next time I play?”

The specific example I provided may have been based on colored shapes, but the key to harnessing the potential of interaction games in general lies in generating situations in which a challenge can be won only if effective relationships are established among the players.

## **Role-Playing Games and Language Learning**

I mentioned Risk as the game that I played when I was 12 years old—a few years later, my friends and I discovered another game that kept us stuck in the magic circle even on sunny days when we could have played soccer: Dungeons and Dragons. In Dungeons and Dragons, players select characters from such mythical races as warriors, dwarves, wizards, and elves.

My first character was an elf, a creature I have always fancied. But the character that I managed to grow the most was a thief (whose score card I still have!). The thief’s name was Iago, and he managed to get out of many adventures alive, protected only by leather armor. He also succeeded in learning different spells—not bad for a thief. Probably because of my ethical background, he was never really interested in stealing despite the fact that he was a thief. He just did not like the brute force of warriors or the sometimes incomprehensible power of wizards; he preferred to be smart and fast rather than strong and powerful. As the extensions of the game came out, Iago learned new spells, got new weapons, and founded a local guild. After a while he got wealthy enough to build a small

house, close to the guild’s seat, and he also got married. His adventure companions were an immensely powerful warrior played by our older friend, an elf (which had survived my own elf, and which I envied), a wizard, and some other characters.

While we all bought the original basic game set, we photocopied the extension books, and we had no money to buy anything else than the dice—no miniatures, and no ready-made adventures. Ours was a strongly oral game: the “dungeon master” (designated narrator) narrated the story, and players made decisions about where to go, what to say, and so on. During the time in which I served as dungeon master, I spent entire evenings drawing maps and preparing scenarios, or simply thinking about the new weapons I wanted for Iago.

Dungeons and Dragons was a milestone in fantasy role-playing games. The basic set has relatively simple rules; a book with different characters and creatures, to boost the imagination of the players; and a set of dice that spices up the gameplay with chance. The amazing power of engagement that Dungeons and Dragons has is that no adventure is like another, since each comes from the mind and words of the dungeon master, and from the choices of players. It is based on mimicry, blended with competition and chance.

Characters were a kind of virtual dolls for us: we looked after them, and we used them to try out possibilities. Some of the issues I thought about were: What kind of person will Iago be? Will he be nice? What if he gets a role in the guild? Will he have time for adventures? Or, on a different note: What happens if I betray my friends for money? What if I die for saving them from the red dragon? For a teenager, answering such questions means exploring a new realm, trying to figure out what he would do as an adult in that situation.

Role-playing is also a way to experiment with identity. While it might be difficult to talk to your parents about becoming a rock star, there is no reason why your character could not learn to play and sing as a bard. How would hard-working warriors relate to a rock star? Role-playing games let you have a virtual double within the game circle, an avatar that can try out new scenarios for you. It is an interesting feature in personal development and for working on creativity and imagination. But role-playing games offer much more for learning, as one cannot get into another's shoes without learning what he knows. I cannot be a wise wizard if I do not at least try to be wise and think before I act. I cannot be a fierce warrior if I'm not brave enough to be the first to attack even the most deadly foes.

The key to bringing role-playing into the classroom is in creating a compelling narrative. We know people through seeing them in action, and in the same way, characters actually only exist within a story. Embedding learning into narrative is widely used in primary education—how would that work for teenagers? Two elements of Dungeons and Dragons will be central to the effective use of role-playing games in the classroom:

1. Characters should be believable and likable (because only skillful actors can pretend to be somebody they dislike). Dungeons and Dragons achieves this by providing both strict rules for the creation of a character (a roll of the dice for abilities, types selected from a closed set) and large space for imagination. In the classroom, this could mean offering types, such as journalist, policeman, fashion designer, and then providing rules for customization.
2. Stories should be compelling, but competition can also motivate players. Really compelling stories often need a professional writer, but competition can also fire up players if the story is mediocre.

Keeping these two simple rules in mind, you can set up a number of role-playing sessions for language and culture

learning for example. Let's take a class of advanced Italian for Grade 10. As a starting point, create a scenario: a small village in Tuscany. You can create locations by looking for pictures or drawings, and taking some simple notes.

Then build a simple plot around a central event: a theft would be classic, but also finding a person or secret place, or anything that is meaningful to your students. Going to a bar and getting a Coke, an example that appears in many second language books, is not really meaningful; getting a date with a nice girl is more meaningful; saving that girl from her brutal boyfriend without getting hurt is definitely meaningful. The plot should have a conflict to resolve (here is why the Coke alone is not really interesting), and should be articulated into the beginning, middle, and end of the story (for a very useful book about writing stories, please see McKee, 1997). To make the game interactive, you really need to have the interactions ready: setting the scene and defining the starting goal.

Finally, who are the characters in the plot? The girl, the boyfriend, the newcomer? Why not the girl's parents as well? They might have a forgotten love story from when they were teenagers. Some characters will be played by the players; others will be nonplaying characters and will be your puppets in the story.

With these materials (location, plot/introduction, character) you are ready to go. For each playing character in your story, be it per student or per team, you will need an introduction to the world of the game from her/his point of view. As in real life, each individual or team has a goal and different information. Then, you must prepare a map so the players can decide where and how to move. The map could also be partially hidden at the outset of the game, and be revealed step-by-step. Finally, you can have students create their characters. Have students read the introduction, then make choices. They will find themselves in situations in which they have to do something: explain ("What are you doing in my garden?"), negotiate ("I need that bike but I

don't have enough money for a deposit"), be polite (Ask for directions to a policeman), and so on.

As the teacher, you can guide these situations, which can be also acted live on a stage. But most of all, you should prepare students by having them work out the geography, culture, history, and, of course, language: If a *carabiniere* arrives, what is he exactly? A policeman? A military person? Can he complain because my car is parked illegally? If I have to travel from A to B, what options do I have? How should I address an older lady? What should I expect for a Sunday lunch at a family's table?

A compelling narrative is a highly effective form of learning media. When the narrative structure contains space for our choices as a character, and when this is done interactively with other players, multiple possibilities are open for creative teaching that can employ role-playing for learning.